

## ***“Walkin’ on Water”***

Matthew 14:22-33

Aug. 13, 2017

Merritt Island Presbyterian Church

<sup>22</sup> Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. <sup>23</sup> And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, <sup>24</sup> but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. <sup>25</sup> And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. <sup>26</sup> But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, “It is a ghost!” And they cried out in fear. <sup>27</sup> But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.” <sup>28</sup> Peter answered him, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” <sup>29</sup> He said, “Come.” So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. <sup>30</sup> But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, “Lord, save me!” <sup>31</sup> Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” <sup>32</sup> When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. <sup>33</sup> And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, “Truly you are the Son of God.”

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June 1, 1940. A story in the UK *Guardian*, begins...*In the grey chill of dawn today in a south-eastern port, war correspondents watched with incredulous joy the happening of a miracle. By every canon of military science the BEF (British Expeditionary Force) has been doomed for the last four or five days. Completely out-numbered, out-gunned, out-planned, all but surrounded, it had seemed certain to be cut off from its last channel of escape. Yet for several hours this morning we saw ship*

*after ship come into harbour and discharge thousands of British soldiers safe and sound on British soil. As the sun was turning the grey clouds to burnished copper, the first destroyer of the day slid swiftly into the harbour, its silhouette bristling with the heads of the men packed shoulder to shoulder on its decks. One watched them with a pride that became almost pain. They had passed through nights and days of hunger, weariness and fear, but nearly every man still had his rifle and a clip of ammunition; nearly all had brought their full kit with them - and what an agony its weight must have been. They were still soldiers and still in good heart. They were of all units and ranks. Some were in the position of the gunners whose battery had been shelled out of existence ..., because our overworked fighter planes had had no time to deal with the German reconnaissance planes.*

*Their battery commander had told them to do the best they could for themselves, and they had walked 30 miles to Dunkirk. It is a stretch of level sand backed by dunes. The sea in front of it is shallow for some way out, so that ships cannot come close in. Many of the men have spent up to four days on this beach, hiding in hollows scratched in the sand, from the German planes which have scourged them with bomb and machine-gun. Every now and then, among the men who climb the gangplank into England, one sees stretcher-bearers carrying a still form, its face bloodless and remote. Yet [others] survive in their thousands and are able to joke and sing. In no time the ship is ready to return to Dunkirk. But before it is ready, another has drawn up alongside. British ships and French and Dutch, warships, drifters, trawlers, yachts, barges, they bring their loads across the hostile Channel and then go back undaunted into the inferno.*

Jim and I went to see *Dunkirk*, the movie a couple of weeks ago. The film follows a young British soldier who is among more than 400,000 Allies in WWII, fleeing German forces and trapped for days in May 1940 on the shores of Dunkirk in Northern France. The young soldier's enemies are all around-- German ground troops are advancing and the Luftwaffe is raining bombs and bullets on them as they crouch in the sand or wait for hours in shoulder-deep water for a ship to come in. His enemy and salvation is also the furious sea, when the naval ship he boards is bombed and sinks, taking hundreds of Allied lives and threatening his own. The greatest enemy is his fear. He does everything he can to survive, without concern for others until he makes friends with a young soldier, a Frenchman, who saves his life. The British soldier's response to this act of kindness is to return the kindness--to seek to save the Frenchman's life.

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Fear is also the enemy of the disciples in our passage in Matthew today. Jesus sends away the crowds that he has miraculously fed and the disciples to their little boat, telling them "go ahead to the other side" while he goes to "the mountain" to pray. A stormy sea stirs the disciples' fear, and brings to our minds the storm that Jesus calms in Matthew 8:23-27, when he is with them in their boat. Now they are battling wind and waves at night in a tiny sailing craft, without Jesus, and the "wind is against them." They are unexpectedly "far from land." For fishermen, the sea is a source of sustenance, a way to eat **and** make a living. The sea is a common mode of travel in ancient, coastal

communities. But water is not always a friend. Remember Noah and God's power revealed in the flood in Genesis 9 that destroys life on earth. Remember Pharaoh's soldiers in Exodus 14:21 that drown in the Red Sea after it parts for the Israelites, led by Moses, to cross on dry land.

The fearful disciples fail to recognize Jesus when he comes to them in an unexpected way --walking on water in the stormy sea. They cry out, "It's a ghost!" Jesus seeks to calm their fears and overcome their doubts with assurance of the divine presence. He says "Take heart; *it is I.*" In Greek, "*Eigo eimi.*" This is the divine name given to Moses in Exodus 3:14--YHWH, translated, "I am."

While the Jesus walking on water account appears in Matthew, Mark and John, only Matthew tells us about Peter's experience. His first response is to doubt and demand another "sign," more proof of his identity. "Lord, *if it is you*, command me to come to you on the water." Notice it's not Jesus' idea for Peter to walk on water. But he goes along with it. "Come," he says. Peter steps out of the boat and moves toward Jesus, but what happens? He takes his eyes off Christ and he looks around! Faith is replaced by fear. And he sinks!

But when he cries out to the Lord for help, Christ grabs him by the hand. Unlike the first story in Matthew of Jesus calming the storm, which ends with the disciples wondering, "Who is this that even the wind and the waves obey him?", this time, the disciples worship him and say, "Truly, you ARE the Son of God."

The message for us today is GRACE. God wants us to step out of the

boat and leave our comfort zone, but when we do, like Peter, doubts and fear will come. But then we need to cry out to the Lord and remember the divine presence in our lives. Christ continually beckons us to draw closer to Him, while at the same time, he is drawing near to us, with an outstretched hand. As Hebrew 12:1-2a tells us, with the great cloud of witnesses who have gone before us, let us keep on running the race, “looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame.”

As long as we keep our eyes on Jesus, we’ll be walkin’ on water--with Him!

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Not knowing the story of Dunkirk before seeing the movie, I was surprised to discover the recurring theme of grace. The young, British soldier, on a train after the evacuation reads a newspaper story of the event he has lived through. He expects to be branded a coward, with all who retreated from Dunkirk. But that’s not what happened.

The evacuation of more than 335,000 Allied troops is seen as a miracle inspiring hope. When British naval ships cannot make it to Dunkirk or are sunk by German aircraft on the way, more than 700 little ships--civilian owned and manned vessels--cross the English Channel to bring the troops to safety. Considering our gospel lesson alongside the miracle of Dunkirk, I can see Jesus, extending his hand by using ordinary

people, to take risks and step out of their comfort zones to help others. Ordinary people *walkin' on water*--with Him.

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During our staff meeting Thursday, I shared the story of Jesus walking on water and stilling the storm. They shared times when they stepped out of the boat to follow Jesus, uncertain where the journey might take them, or when they felt Jesus taking them by the hand, calming and leading them through the storms of their lives.

I asked myself when had I stepped out of the boat and left my comfort zone to follow Him? And when had Jesus taken my hand during a storm of my life? The answer came quickly: Every day! Every day is a leap of faith. Every day, I need God's grace! I need to feel the touch of Jesus' hand, a reminder of the divine presence with me! I need to hear Christ's reassuring voice, "Take heart! It is I! *Eigo eimi.*"

An image flashed before my eyes of the hands that hold me--the hands of Jesus are the hands of my staff, congregation, friends, family. They are the hands of the Body of Christ, in every time, in every place--the great cloud of witnesses, in Hebrews 12, helping us run the race that is our lives of faith!

As I finished this message last night, I heard of the tragedy in Charlotte--the hatred and loss of life. I know what Jesus would do -- he would speak out against the hatred, bigotry and violence. If those in power, friends, are not modeling righteousness, truth and love, it's up to us to do it! Get out of the boat and go boldly, out of your comfort zone! Speak up for the victims, the voiceless and their families. We can do this

if we pray and trust Jesus, who is with us now and always during the storms of our lives. His hand is outstretched! And when you are afraid, cry out to the one perfect example of self-giving love, the one who says, "Come!" As long as we keep our eyes on Jesus, we'll be *walkin- on water-*-with Him!

**Let us pray. Holy One, thank you for your Word that assures us of your divine presence with us always! Thank you for inviting us to come to you, with all our burdens and fears, during the stormy times of our lives. For telling us that we belong to you, that you love us. Forgive us for our violent ways, for our anger, selfishness and divisiveness in our country. Thank you for hearing our cries of, "Lord, save us!" when we feel as if we are sinking, just as you heard Peter's cries and grabbed him by the hand. Help us, Lord, to be that hand of Christ for others--loving people as much as you love us! Build up our faith. Give us strength and courage to follow you, believing in your miracles. Help us to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus as we seek to serve him each day. In His name we pray. Amen.**